

Thomas Reid: Power as First Philosophy

Thomas Reid (1710-1796), replacement for Adam Smith's professorial chair in Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University and founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense, argued that animate beings have the capacity for power and that their actions are free within the constraints of that power. Power, for Reid, is the resource of the will. Power and weakness are contradictory as 'weakness or impotence are defects or privations of power'¹. This same logic can be applied to ability and disability. Disability is frequently conceived as the opposite to ability: the 'able bodied' being grouped differently to the 'disabled'. If disability were instead conceived as contradictory to ability, the power of the individual agent would be conceived of separately to their subjection to certain physical or mental disabilities. Power is what differentiates beings with a 'will' from those without; their power is, in a sense, what makes them the author of their actions and their life. This essay will argue that to be defined by ones limitations rather than by ones actions is consistent with the philosophies of scepticism and empiricism. It is only when, as in Reid's philosophy, power in general as well as specific powers are separated out from the will and its experiential intertwinement that it becomes possible to conceive of disabilities as having nothing to do with power *or* the will; the will being subject to many different powers. The will can act in response to disability but it is not subject to their 'power' as they have none, which is to say that the agent has power over their dis/ability rather than their dis/ability having power over them.

This essay will aim to explore what exactly Reid's definition of power is; the significance of the difference of this notion of power in relation to those given by Locke and Hume; and, finally, offer suggestions for how this conception of power effects on a thinking of capability and disability.

¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 11-12.

I. What is Power?

Although Reid does discuss specific powers these are not the particular subject of interest for this essay, instead it is his more general and primary notion of *power* which will be elaborated on. The definition he gives in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* is helpful because of the complexity he gives to the subject:

The words power and faculty, which are often used in speaking of the mind, need little explication. Every operation supposes a power in the being that operates; for to suppose any thing to operate which has no power to operate is manifestly absurd. But, on the other hand, there is no absurdity in supposing a being to have power to operate when it does not operate. Thus, I may have power to walk when I sit, or to speak when I am silent. Every operation, therefore, implies power; but the power does not imply the operation.²

Thus power is the prerequisite of every active or passive faculty and their operation. The implication of power in the operation but not the reverse highlights an inactive (although *not* passive) power can be called upon by operation but exists regardless of its being called upon. As long as a will is possible then it must be predicated by the existence of power, regardless of various limitations imposed on an individual by internal, external or corporeal states. This is significant in that ‘power’, as Reid conceives it, is outside the empirical realm at every instance when it is not an active in causing an empirically perceivable effect. Empiricism is not sufficient to the task of conceiving of power in Reid’s terms. It is embodied power rather than embodied perception that is afforded primacy in Reid’s philosophy. That, for him, power exists even when it is not active or perceivable, puts him firmly against the empirical or sceptical schools of philosophy prevalent in the mid-eighteenth century. Instead it

² Reid, T., *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1785), p. 6. Reid’s texts, particularly *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, will be quoted from extensively as his texts are rarely read now, and not in common consciousness as Locke’s and Hume’s are.

might place him more in the context of philosophers such as Rousseau, Nietzsche and Dewey, for whom the body and its capacity for liberty *as* power prior to action, is of primary importance.

The more general conception of power, which is not related to specific faculties but underlies them all, is introduced in his late and only recently published essay, 'Of Power', where it is defined as being antecedent not only to an event but also to the will which produces an event:

Every voluntary exertion to produce an event seems to imply a persuasion in the agent that he has power to produce an event. A deliberate exertion to produce an event implies a conception of the event, and some belief or hope that his exertion will be followed by it. This I think cannot be denied. The consequence is that a conception of power is antecedent to every deliberate exertion of will to produce an event.³

Several faculties might be called upon to conceive of an event before acting towards its realisation, however, each of these faculties and, of course, the will required to produce it through action are all dependent on sufficient power to do so. What interests Reid, perhaps particularly because of his emphasis on common sense, is that the *conception* of power precedes action, this is a conception of a general capacity as well as specific capability afforded by individual faculties. Power precedes the operation of every individual faculty and every wilful action undertaken by an agent. Our conception of our own power, generally or specifically, is dependent on our faculties and therefore, for a gamut of reasons, we may vastly under or overestimate our power. We may be particularly prone to underestimate our power, for example, if we have learned read certain aspects of our constitution as directive or limiting of our action. Disability, gender, class and sexuality may be examples of perceivable qualities being operative in defining our ability to act, whereas, in Reid's terms, these would be considered subject

³ Thomas Reid & John Haldane, (2001). An essay by Thomas Reid on the conception of power. *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (202):1-12., p. 3.

to the agent's power and therefore nothing to do with the faculties capable of utilising power. Reid's location of the primacy of power in experience and action is the key to considering the agency available to us in its direction:

We are conscious that we have power to produce certain events by our will and exertion. The conviction of this power is implied in the very voluntariness of exertion, for no man makes an exertion to do what he does not think to be in his power. In our own voluntary actions, therefore, we have a conviction and consequently a conception of efficient or productive power in ourselves. And this conception we had so early that it must be the work of nature.⁴

Power is therefore not something that we invent or gain from outside but rather the basis of all understanding and action as well as the very *capacity* for future understanding or action. 'Efficient or productive power' is a predicate of a will and the action of the will is the only perceivable measure of that power even though will and power are not assimilable. Reid goes further, writing in *Active Powers* that not only does the will depend on power but that, in fact, the will is *in* man's power:

in common life, when men speak of what is, or is not, in a man's power, they attend only to the external and visible effects, which only can be perceived, and which only can affect them. Of these, it is true, that nothing is in a man's power, but what depends upon his will, and this is all that is meant by this common saying. But this is so far from excluding his will from being in his power, that it necessarily implies it. For to say that what depends upon the will is in a man's power, but the will is not in his power, is to say that the end is in his power, but the means necessary to that end are not in his power, which is a contradiction⁵.

This significantly limits any conception of the primacy of the will in human action, making it subject not only to power in general but also to the complex relation between

⁴ Thomas Reid & John Haldane, (2001). An essay by Thomas Reid on the conception of power. *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (202):1-12., p. 7.

⁵ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 274.

the various faculties afforded power prior to its event. For example, I may want to lift a 100kg weight in a complex compound exercise such as a power clean but I will not have sufficient power to do so if I am not yet strong enough to lift this weight; my central nervous system is insufficiently prepared; my nutrition has been poor the preceding week; or my mind is distracted by things outside of the gym or by occurrences in the gym. I may then reflect on my insufficient power and direct my will elsewhere accordingly. Power dictates the direction of the will and locates the will as being subject to various bodily faculties: emphasising the experience of the body and mind before the direction of the will. This conception of 'power' as being separate from the will and its effects is at once inside and outside the consideration of metaphysics, especially that of empiricism. Our very ability to have the power to conceive of power implies its existence. Reid's conception of power is subject to this paradox because it is only *implied* in the 'voluntariness of exertion', it does not consist in it. Power *is* but is only measurable by its effects rather than in itself.

By attempting to reduce 'power' to the logic of empiricism or metaphysics more generally and read it as just yet another 'will' we enter the territory of infinite regress which is therefore not applicable to Reid's philosophy. As Timothy O'Connor argues, power precedes volition but is not itself volition because, 'We needn't have performed a prior act of will in order to have determined the action-initiating volition. We simply exert active power (a conception of which we form through its effects) in so determining it—that is, we determine the will directly. *The exertion of active power is not itself a type of volition.*'⁶ As such, active power is not will but it *is* what makes will possible. O'Connor goes on to suggest correctly that 'an exertion of active power, according to Reid, is not any kind of event at all. Rather, it is the instantiation of a causal

⁶ Timothy O'Connor, *Person and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 46.

relation between agent and volition, and Reid does not consider this to be an event.⁷

Reid himself argues that:

But it is said, "That nothing is in our power but what depends upon the will, and therefore the will itself cannot be in our power." I answer, That this is a fallacy arising from taking a common saying in a sense which it never was intended to convey, and in a sense contrary to what it necessarily implies.⁸

This is why I argue that Gideon Yaffe is incorrect to state that Reid has 'a well-developed conception of the metaphysics of power' despite the fact that he suggests Reid 'is able to tolerate the mysterious metaphysics that our linguistic practices imply and which bar us from analyzing the efficient causal relation in any way which could count as a reduction.'⁹ It is not the 'metaphysics of power' that Reid seems to be describing at all but rather the *experience* or *sense* of power. Of course at least one aspect of that experience is related to the faculty of reason but power is not limited to that faculty, nor is it subject to it. The danger for Reid is not just the reduction of the causal relation but, rather more importantly, the insistence of the reduction of power to metaphysics or specifically to the faculty of reason. We are able to relate the faculty of reason to power but power also enables that faculty, as well as many others, and is not the same as it.

⁷ Timothy O' Connor, *Person and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 47

⁸ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 273.

⁹ Gideon Yaffe, *Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 157. As O'Connor argues, 'Reid's view is not subject to any *internal* problem that forces him to choose between an infinite regress of mental acts and an uncaused event at the core of every free action. Reid never squarely addresses the further question of why the obtaining of a causal relation between agent and volition (an exertion of active power) doesn't qualify as a kind of event. It is not, to be sure, a prior event that produces the willing.' in Timothy O' Connor, *Person and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 48

II. Reid on Locke and Hume's concepts of Power

Reid reads Locke as suggesting that power is a form of potentiality which is preceded by a reflection influenced by sensory experience of the effects of power. This not only excludes power's primacy but also reduces the sphere of human action to that of perception. Furthermore, it precludes the possibility of the conception of complex subjectivity as underpinning our understanding as well as our action. As such, Reid works towards unpacking Locke's conception of a limited subjectivity and agency by beginning with an exposition and analysis of the philosopher's conception of power:

The sum of it is, That observing, by our senses, various changes in objects, we collect a possibility in one object to be changed, and in another a possibility of making that change, and so come by that idea which we call power. Thus we say the fire has a power to melt gold, and gold has power to be melted; the first he calls active, the second passive power. He thinks, however, that we have the most distinct notion of active power, by attending to the power which we ourselves exert, in giving motion to our bodies when at rest, or in directing our thoughts to this or the other object as we will. And this way of forming the idea of power he attributes to reflection, as he refers the former to sensations.¹⁰

In Reid's reading, everything for Locke is reduced to sensation and reflection, with no sense that both are subject to faculties which are themselves subject to sufficient power. The conflation of power to will or even basic physical action also leaves no room for a freedom prior to the application of the will. For Locke there is no power to reflect, only power in the actions that reflection results in. Most unsettlingly for Reid, power seems for Locke to be the potential to be effected on, as well as to effect, present in any object:

Whereas he distinguishes power into active and passive, I conceive passive power is no power at all. He means by it, the possibility of being changed. To call this power, seems to be a misapplication of the word. I do not remember to have

¹⁰ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 23.

met with the phrase passive power in any other good author. Mr Locke seems to have been unlucky in inventing it; and it deserves not to be retained in our language.¹¹

Reid cannot come to terms with Locke's use of the term 'passive power' because the idea that power is simply potentiality significantly reduces identity to perceivable traits or qualities and thereby to the logic of an empirical consciousness. For Locke, consciousness (as reflection on sensation) becomes an objective subjectivity with determinable potential. More importantly, the complexities of individual agency become secondary to empirically perceived reality. To understand fully the repercussions of this requires an inversion: if one's subjective agency is primarily advanced through its relation to empirically determined reality then one is understood to be more or less able to perceive or engage in that 'reality'. If, instead, primacy is afforded to power rather than variable sense perception then everything that follows in a conception of subjective agency would focus on the empowerment of variable ability rather than the limitations of disability. Equally, the primacy of power escapes from the reduction of 'reality' to reason, as power cannot itself be reduced to reason, nor can the faculties which it empowers, including that of the faculty of reason. For Reid, the primacy of power frees agency from the constraints of determinable potential altogether. Potential is empirically determinable, power is not. Every faculty is grounded in power and thus every idea is the product of the faculties that power engenders.

Locke's reduction of the derivation of ideas to what is empirically perceived is challenged by Reid as revealing the contradiction implicit in Locke's philosophical thinking on how power is perceived:

the account which Mr Locke himself gives of the origin of our idea of power, cannot be reconciled to his favourite doctrine, That all our simple ideas have their origin from sensation or reflection; and that, in attempting to derive the

¹¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 23.

idea of power from these two sources only, he unawares brings in our memory, and our reasoning power, for a share in its origin.¹²

It is with the scattered origin of power in the very faculties used to derive it that Reid enables the agent's reflection on their own power beyond the confines of empirical and metaphysical thought.

Reid continues his reading of Locke through his reading of Hume, who he rejects even more vehemently. Reid begins by outlining the latter's arguments that 'we have no idea of substance, material or spiritual; that body and mind are only certain trains of related impressions and ideas; that we have no idea of space or duration, and no idea of power, active or intellectualive.'¹³After making it clear that he only wishes to engage with what he disagrees with in Hume's rejection of the popularly conceived conception of power, he writes:

I observe, that whether this popular opinion be true or false, it follows from mens having this opinion, that they have an idea of power. A false opinion about power, no less than a true, implies an idea of power; for how can men have any opinion, true or false, about a thing of which they have no idea?¹⁴

This very basic argument acts as a strategically placed platform from which Reid is able to further and more carefully critique Hume's (non)conception of power through the latter's reading of Locke:

'The first of the very obvious principles which the author opposes to Mr Locke's account of the idea of power, is, That reason alone can never give rise to any original idea. This appears to me so far from being a very obvious principle, that the contrary is very obvious. Is it not our reasoning faculty that gives rise to the idea of reasoning itself? As our idea of sight takes its rise from our being

¹² Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 26.

¹³ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 27.

¹⁴ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 30.

endowed with that faculty; so does our idea of reasoning. Do not the ideas of demonstration, of probability, our ideas of a syllogism, of major, minor and conclusion, of an enthymeme, dilemma, sorites, and all the various modes of reasoning, take their rise from the faculty of reason? Or is it possible, that a being, not endowed with the faculty of reasoning, should have these ideas? This principle, therefore, is so far from being obviously true, that it appears to be obviously false.¹⁵

The analogical significance Reid gives to faculties of perception as well as the faculty of reason is not simply an analogy and, in fact, clarifies the grounding of both forms of faculty in power. Reid conceives of faculties as being generative of specific ideas and systems of thought through the general power afforded by them to specific ends. This argument works in (at least) two directions at once; first, power is conceived of as being that which enables the operation of faculties; second, that the idea of power is generated or realised through the operation of these faculties, perhaps primarily (for Reid, at least) through their very operation.

After Reid's refutations of Hume's suggestion that reason cannot give rise to original ideas, the latter's form of scepticism as a whole comes specifically under attack. Here it is Reid's humility with regard to philosophical truth that allows him a position to attack Hume from. Philosophy for Reid seems perfectly valuable even if it is only able to afford provisional truths which may later be refuted or come into question:

if we had experience, ever so constant, that every change in nature we have observed, actually had a cause, this might afford ground to believe, that, for the future, it shall be so but no ground at all to believe that it must be so, and cannot be otherwise. Another reason to shew that this principle is not learned from experience is, That experience does not shew us a cause of one in a hundred of those changes which we observe, and therefore can never teach us that there must be a cause of all. Of all the paradoxes this author has advanced, there is not

¹⁵ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 30.

one more shocking to the human understanding than this, That things may begin to exist without a cause. This would put an end to all speculation, as well as to all the business of life.¹⁶

Not only does Reid here outline what he perceives as the un-philosophical character of scepticism through the limits it imposes on provisional philosophical thought and speculation but also its irrelevance to his own philosophical programme. As such, Reid moves away from Locke by suggesting a far more complex subjectivity which precedes specific actions or events whereas Hume is helpful to Reid in allowing him to demonstrate that the power of faculties is separate to their action, even if this is not conceivable within the confines of sceptical philosophy, which Reid rejects.

III. Power, Liberty and Dis/ability

Reid's discussion of power is explicitly directed towards an elaboration of what he calls 'the liberty of moral agents'. He defines that latter in the following way:

By the liberty of a moral agent, I understand, a power over the determinations of his own will. If, in any action, he had power to will what he did, or not to will it, in that action he is free. But if, in every voluntary action, the determination of his will be the necessary consequence of something involuntary in the state of his mind, or of something in his external circumstances, he is not free; he has not what I call the liberty of a moral agent, but is subject to necessity.¹⁷

Will, as already discussed, is not only dependent on sufficient power but also different from it. Power is outside of necessity and therefore is the only vestige of freedom and capacity for moral liberty. Moral actions cannot be measured in terms of involuntary states or circumstances, such as physical or mental disabilities, but must rather be understood in terms of the power available to the individual outside of necessity. The

¹⁶ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 32.

¹⁷ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 267.

difficulty therein is that power is only perceivable through its effects on actions and events. However, it is to undermine the power of any agent to focus more on their subjection to necessity than on their wilful actions. Despite Reid's primary focus being on power he is also sensitive to actions or ways of being which seem to involve no specific power as well as the influence of necessities such as illness. Equally there is little credit to be afforded to the action of an individual's moral liberty if, as he argues in the case of Cato, their goodness is simply part of their constitution:

What was, by an ancient author, said of Cato...He was good because he could not be otherwise. But this saying, if understood literally and strictly, is not the praise of Cato, but of his constitution, which was no more the work of Cato, than his existence. On the other hand, if a man be necessarily determined to do ill, this case seems to me to move pity, but not disapprobation. He was ill, because he could not be otherwise. Who can blame him? Necessity has no law.¹⁸

Reid's insistence on the absolute difference between necessity and power is significant in separating influences on agency from limits on agency. It is therefore clearly possible to have a positive or enabling influence on an individual's conception of their power, just as it is possible to engage (consciously or not) in disabling an individual's agency through an education or culture where the perception of 'weaknesses' is given primacy. The role cultures and societies play in enabling rather than labelling otherwise 'free agents' becomes a very particular kind of moral question when then individual moral action of an individual is suppressed or they are not educated in such a way as to be aware of their own power and its concomitant liberty.

Reid's conception of a 'free agent' is extremely nuanced and puts into question the concept of a 'reasonable agent', the faculty of reason being only one of many influencing the actions of man:

¹⁸ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 269.

We call man a free agent in the same way as we call him a reasonable agent. In many things he is not guided by reason, but by principles similar to those of the brutes. His reason is weak at best. It is liable to be impaired or lost, by his own fault, or by other means. In like manner, he may be a free agent, though his freedom of action may have many similar limitations. The liberty I have described has been represented by some Philosophers as inconceivable, and as involving an absurdity.¹⁹

Liberty, for Reid, is not freedom of the will (reasonable or not) but rather the freedom afforded to the individual by their power, which may or may not become realised in the will. It is the freedom of power to be able to act by instinct or habit as well through conscious will. It is only within this freedom of power that his conception of moral liberty can be of significance, precisely because the freedom is much greater and more complex than simply the freedom of the will (to be well or ill according to an external or internal rational schema). The presumed absurdity he locates is that of infinite regress of will, however, as Reid conceives of it, this regression ends in power. The specific effects of power on moral liberty are defined as being limited and frequently completely absent – most actions perhaps being conceivable as amoral:

This moral liberty a man may have, though it do not extend to all his actions, or even to all his voluntary actions. He does many things by instinct, many things by the force of habit without any thought at all, and consequently without will. In the first part of life, he has not the power of self-government any more than the brutes. That power over the determinations of his own will, which belongs to him in ripe years, is limited, as all his powers are; and it is perhaps beyond the reach of his understanding to define its limits with precision. We can only say, in general, that it extends to every action for which he is accountable.²⁰

¹⁹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 271.

²⁰ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell, 1788), p. 270.

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As such power seems to develop with age and are presumably educable. It is perhaps also possible to create a context where the enabling of individual powers is of primary educative value, rather than one where power is read as secondary to perceivable objective potential. Power over the determination of will is achieved through the complex relations of the specific powers of the various faculties. But as long as there is power there is freedom and it is in that freedom, rather than in our limitations, that we may begin to act.